

# Family assessment: working with children, young people and families

The application of broad policy frameworks in practice through program development and service delivery is described throughout the chapters in this text. Nurses and midwives are integral to these services and programs. To practise effectively, nurses need to be equipped with a range of competencies and attributes described in the Introduction. Among these competencies is the ability to undertake a comprehensive family assessment and to recognise the interplay of family, community and environment on children's health.

Assessing families is an important aspect of working with children and young people, as it is within the context of the family that care is commonly provided. In the following section, the concept of family assessment is discussed, and a framework and process provided. However, it is important to be aware also of situations when care for children and young people is provided outside the family. A specific example is that of homeless youth, who may be living in circumstances outside the family and have particular health, social and financial concerns.

Neabel et al. (2000) justify the importance of nurses and midwives conducting comprehensive family assessments so that they better understand the family's experience of health or an illness event. Undertaking a thorough family assessment enables the development of an understanding of the family unit, what the health or illness event means to the family members, and identifies what they need. A range of family assessment tools is available, each with different aims and scope. It is important to evaluate such tools as fit for purpose and to critique their ability to achieve their stated aims.

Until recently, family assessment has been dominated by what Feeley and Gottlieb (2000) describe as a deficit-oriented, disorder-oriented or problem-oriented approaches to clinical practice in the helping professions, in that the focus has been on what is missing, what is wrong or abnormal. An alternative approach considers what the family knows and what they can do. This strengths-based approach focuses on the client or family competencies, resources and capacities, and actively seeks to identify strengths within individuals and families (Feeley & Gottlieb 2000). As well, this approach leads to the development of clinician and client relationships based on partnership. (The important role of partnership in child, youth and family work is expanded across the chapters in the text.)

## Valuing and assessing family strengths in nursing practice

The strengths-based perspective is a recent development in applied health research and clinical practice. Strengths-based research identifies what individuals, families and communities are doing well and what they can do to enhance resilience. All families have strengths that nurses can draw on through primary healthcare and health promotion activities. There is a growing trend in nursing to understand

clinical practice from a family-strengths framework (DeFrain 1999). The strengths framework is a positive approach looking at how families and individuals succeed and promote resilience.

'A strengths approach has many benefits to nurses . . . it is essential therefore that nurses engage in the discourses about family-focused approaches and consider the potential benefits of using a strengths approach to understanding resilience and build health capacity in families' (Darbyshire & Jackson 2005 p. 211).

Consequently, it is now time for nurses working with children and families to adopt aspects of the strengths perspective into their clinical practice.

At the core of the strengths framework is the concept that families function best through operational strengths that afford benefits. The best definition is that strengths are:

' . . . the set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change. Family strengths help to maintain family cohesion while also supporting the development and wellbeing of individual family members' (Moore et al. 2002 p. 3).

Fundamental principles of the strengths perspective are:

- » Each individual, all families and every community have strengths.
- » These strengths develop over time.
- » Strengths can be encouraged.
- » Strengths are vital for optimising outcomes through challenging times, stressful periods and illness (Olson & DeFrain 2006).

The Australian Family Strengths Research Project (Geggie et al. 2000), the first Australian research to identify the language Australians use when talking about their strengths, identified eight qualities of strong Australian families, seven of which were family strengths. The eighth quality, resilience, captures the family's ability to withstand and rebound from crisis and adversity. The eight qualities are:

- » communication
- » togetherness
- » sharing activities
- » affection
- » support
- » acceptance
- » commitment, and
- » resilience.

Not all families demonstrate similar strengths and how each family demonstrates their strengths may differ from one family to another. Uniting families is a positive emotional connectedness towards one another, causing people in strong families to sacrifice for each other's wellbeing (Olson & DeFrain 2006). Connectedness relates to how attached the individual feels towards the others in the family, as well as how attached the individual feels the other family members are to them.

## The Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide

Helping families identify and develop their strengths can instigate change in family functioning and increase family resilience (Patterson 2002). Nurses can easily recognise strengths while listening to families tell their story. Nurses can also observe strengths in the family's behaviour in response to the healthcare needs and challenges facing them. Using the language that Australian families use, the Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide (Table 1.2) can be used to initiate conversations with any family member that look for, support and encourage family strengths. The questions are asked as if concerning the family as a whole. For example, 'Tell me about when you talk openly with each other' refers to when the members of the family talk openly together. However, these questions can be adapted to suit particular family and individual circumstances.

<b>Table 1.2 Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide</b>	
<i>Togetherness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In your family, what shared beliefs really matter to you?</li> <li>• Do you share beliefs that really matter together that you would like to follow during this admission/time of healthcare?</li> <li>• What are some of the things that cause you to celebrate together?</li> <li>• Tell me about some of your family's shared memories.</li> </ul>
<i>Sharing activities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When does the family spend time together?</li> <li>• What is it you like about when you plan activities together?</li> <li>• How often would you play together as a family?</li> <li>• Tell me about when you have good times together in your family.</li> </ul>
<i>Affection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In your family, when is it most easy to tell others how you feel about them?</li> <li>• How best do you show your love for each other?</li> <li>• In what ways do you demonstrate consideration for each other?</li> <li>• How would others know you care about each other?</li> <li>• If I were to ask your best friend about how you care about each other, what would they say?</li> <li>• What sort of things do you do for each other?</li> </ul>
<i>Support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me of times when you as a family 'share the load'.</li> <li>• How would an observer seeing your family know that you help each other?</li> <li>• Can you think of ways you look out for each other?</li> <li>• What does it mean in your family to be 'there for each other'?</li> <li>• In what ways do you encourage others to try new things?</li> </ul>
<i>Communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When do you listen to each other?</li> <li>• Tell me about when you talk openly with each other.</li> <li>• Tell me about some of the times when you laugh together.</li> </ul> <div style="text-align: right;"><i>cont.</i></div>

**Table 1.2 Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide—*cont.****Acceptance*

- In what ways do you accept your individual differences?
- When are you most likely to give each other space?
- How do you show the members of your family that you respect each other's point of view?
- What does forgiveness of each other look like in your family?
- What different responsibilities does each of you have?

*Commitment*

- When do you feel safe and secure with each other?
- How would others know that you trust each other?
- List some of the things your family does for your community.
- What rules do you have in your family and how should these be followed during this admission?

*Resilience*

- In what ways has this admission changed your plans?
- What helps keep each other hopeful?
- Can you tell me about when your family pulled together in a crisis?
- When you have a problem, what helps you discuss your problems?
- What do other people say they admire in your family?

Source: These questions were developed by Smith (2007, in progress) based on Geggie et al. (2000), with permission from *Our scrapbook of strengths* (Family Action Centre & St Luke's Innovative Resources 2003), using the language that Australian families use when talking about their own family.

The Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide contains questions that can be asked of a child, young person or their family that assist in generating conversations. Through identifying the strengths that a family use, nurses may highlight for the first time that each family member offers something of value to each other, thus increasing the family's sense of purpose and unity. Recognising and encouraging family strengths helps demonstrate an understanding of the whole family's needs and hopes. Walking with the family in this way creates a connectedness that is unique to the relationship. Attempt the activity in Box 1.4 to apply the principles described to practice, and see Chapter 9 for further application of the family strengths perspective with the young person.

**Box 1.4 Practice highlight: assessing family strengths**

Utilising the Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide, engage in a conversation with a family as a group about their strengths and how their family functions across the eight qualities. Explore what goals the family are currently striving towards. Remember, not every strength needs to be explored with every family.

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